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## Post-colonial Film Collaboration and Festival Politics 2005

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# POST-COLONIAL FILM COLLABORATION AND FESTIVAL POLITICS

DOROTHEE WENNER

As a filmmaker Dorothee Wenner has a particular interest in the relationship of the West to non-European cultures. Since 1990 she has also worked as programmer for the Berlin Film Festival/Forum and has acted as the delegate for the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and India. Wenner is also a programme consultant for the Dubai Film Festival, and she has been a member of the board and of the jury of the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA) since its inception.<sup>1</sup> In her capacity as film festival programmer Wenner travels extensively across Africa and India to network, source new films and spot trends. She is an expert on the development of cinematic cultures and in this piece she reflects on her observations of the existing and emerging cinematic practices of women on the African continent. In a candid and refreshing multi-faceted approach to the variables that inform the curatorial choices, exhibition platforms and reception contexts that shape how content is determined, her insights reveal the push-pull factors that position African films in an international environment. She elaborates on these insights by describing the complex layers informing the production, circulation and eventual exhibition challenges that face African filmmakers. These challenges

are about straddling the divides between the reception of their films by local audiences in their home territories and by audiences farther afield: on the African continent itself and within the international context of the festival circuit. Coupled with this is the persistent issue of the politics of representation of African cinema in Europe.

This contribution evolved as a result of conversations Dorothee Wenner and Antje Schuhmann had over three years, beginning when she shared some of her thoughts upon returning home to Berlin on the occasion of the AMAA awards in 2011 after one of her trips.

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On a flight from Port Harcourt to Lagos I had the chance to chat with Hawa Essuman, the young co-director of *Soul Boy* (2010), a Kenyan film that had recently created quite a stir internationally and had been nominated in many categories at the AMAA in Nigeria. Hawa [Essuman] was ‘the chosen one’ who was invited to climb on the director’s seat in ‘one-of-those’ Euro-African projects currently so much in vogue in various African countries. Internationally acclaimed German director Tom Tykwer was her mentor. He, with support of major funding sources from Germany, had provided the infrastructure and finances that had made this film possible.

*Soul Boy* is as much a realistic ghost story as a romantic fairytale, with two teenagers falling in love against the background of Kibera, Nairobi’s largest slum, where the entire film was shot.

Since its première, the film has been screened at virtually every other festival worldwide, and it was wonderful to watch this Kenyan success story unfolding. But the joy was not shared by all – some people in Nairobi were highly critical of the project and asked, on the occasion of the nominations, whether *Soul Boy* was really an African film, given the strong German involvement. Hawa said she could not understand the debate – she insisted that it was, indeed, her film, which she alone had directed, even though Tom Tykwer was on the set all the time, except for when they split into two units. Hawa said, ‘On set, Tom and I discussed the shots and I took all his advice and suggestions.’ She frankly admits that she benefited greatly from the project’s framing – not only because of what she learnt back then, but

also because she was able to seek advice later on from the German crew she had worked with. She was currently busy writing the script for her next film, she said, and was making the best possible use of the advantages and networks she has thanks to *Soul Boy*. Who would not?

Hawa told me that she much prefers not to work alone, even during the writing process. Yet this time she has different company – a group of highly energetic women in Nairobi. Her remarks on the importance of a local support system brought us to an interesting new phenomenon: the ‘Kenyan girls thing’. These days in Kenya there are so many young female directors and producers suddenly surfacing in the film industry that everyone is wondering: where are the men? Hawa replied, laughingly, when I asked her about it: ‘Yes ... it is true. But honestly, I don’t know, we don’t know how it came to that, how we became an almost exclusive women-only circle ... Well, we are all anxiously awaiting the next film one of us makes. And we hang out together a lot and help and support each other, when we can.’

I also asked energetic young Kenyan filmmaker Zipporah ‘Zippy’ Nyaruri to give me her explanation for the ‘new phenomenon’ – and her first reaction was: ‘Women are fighters!’ But she reflected on it overnight and came back with more reasons: ‘Most women in Kenya generally are independent by default, which I think reflects the situation of women in film, too. But we also want to be independent of men in our filmmaking so we are able to tell the stories in our own ways. What I feel is, we need men in the team to help with the technical aspect of things, as most of them have more experience than us in this field.’

Zippy explained to me that Kenyan men in the industry simply have the advantage of having years’ more experience than women and most men also did – and still do – receive a better education. But why have female filmmakers in Kenya suddenly become so much more visible? I think it is because of a particular momentum within which a certain kind of personalities came together: these are women who are not in competition with each other, and who seemed to have understood that the success of one is not a disadvantage to the others, but rather the opposite. For me, it is also interesting that this way of being with each other – of relating to each other – is highly political, in the sense that I would say this is feminist practice at its

best. However, I realise that many African women would not situate their mutual support within this framework, as it is often perceived as exclusively Western. Of course, this solidarity amongst women – which can also include men – still does not resolve the very difficult conditions of filmmaking in a context where there are hardly any funding opportunities.

More than once, crucial movements have started in the film world as a result of some filmmakers or other film professionals becoming friends (instead of envious competitors). Of course, it takes many more ‘ingredients’ than just friendship to make this happen, but, time and again, personal support between people who create a ‘scene’ has proven to be absolutely essential to get such a movement going.<sup>2</sup> This fact is crucial, as there are neither governments nor other institutions that support filmmakers in any way in many African countries today. Needless to say, this is not only true for the African continent, but also in other countries around the world. It is also necessary to add that in Africa major differences exist between the various countries. In some places, like Burkina Faso or Angola, for example, filmmakers have enjoyed tremendous support from their governments, especially in the past when cinema was considered important in the process of de-colonialisation by some visionary politicians like Thomas Sankara, the famous president of Burkina Faso. The FESPACO<sup>3</sup> festival of Ouagadougou is but one example of that proud heritage. These are also places with historically strong traditions of filmmaking practices, but with the demise of celluloid cinema and the rise of newly-structured funding realities in Europe, that period came to an end – with sad results, like the closing of most cinema halls in sub-Saharan Africa, or the recent death of some established film festivals on the continent, such as in Mozambique.

Next to the financial precariousness, there is yet another challenge that is often overlooked. At the African Film Summit in 2006 there was a discussion about developing a blueprint media law for countries without applicable media jurisdiction: filmmakers and producers from such places know how crucial it is to get this going and they backed the idea wholeheartedly. At first glance media law might be considered a low priority when looking at the situation for filmmakers in sub-Saharan Africa – but only until one discovers that in many cases

it is a precondition, for instance, for embarking on co-productions or for receiving support and funding. Media law is actually crucial for stimulating local productions in Africa.

When trying to outline the essentials of today's challenges for filmmakers from Africa, another encounter comes to my mind: my meeting with a young filmmaker from Zambia at the Durban film festival's co-production market. I very much liked the project she presented there, and she even had a French producer attached to the project. However: she could not apply for many of the existing funds because, in her country, there is currently not even a single production house in operation; thus her film technically did not even qualify as *Zambian*.

Given these financial and infrastructural challenges, it becomes obvious that filmmakers have little choice but to help themselves, be they men or women. Whereas the new female-dominated set-up in Kenya is quite specific, the debate on the African identity of films made with international support is 'hot' throughout the continent. Increasingly, factors of globalisation and migration make it extremely difficult to adjust criteria and make distinctions regarding what constitutes an 'African' film or to decide on the 'authenticity' of an African film in the context of a co-production. Is a film shot in Africa by an African director based in the diaspora, who sourced money from abroad, more or less African than a production financed and made totally independent from Europe? What about productions based on scripts supervised by Western screenwriting labs? Are films by African directors, which win critical acclaim on the international festival circuit but fail to find a release in Africa, more African than box office hits from Nigeria or Ghana? What about films which are released on a wide scale, but only on DVD or on the Internet? It is an endless debate but it is none the less highly relevant. Who decides what is right or wrong, good or bad, and based on what criteria?

When it comes to reflecting on forms of collaboration between African filmmakers and their funders, whether they be individuals or organisations, it might be more productive to shift the focus of the debate towards the ambitions and intentions of foreign interests in African filmmaking. Indeed, most initiatives seem welcomed in Africa, if only because of the simple lack of other support mechanisms

available. In principle, at the moment, there is a huge difference between films produced in Africa solely or mainly for domestic markets and those made with the ambition of releasing them internationally, especially for the festival circuit. And this is not to forget the many films commissioned by Western funding agencies and NGOs for educational purposes, on topics such as HIV/Aids-awareness, which make up the bread-and-butter work for many African filmmakers. This area of commissioned films for educational purposes released only in African countries is largely ignored in the Western debate on this matter, whereas from an African perspective these films belong to the same game of dependency – just with a different set of rules. I remember a South African filmmaker complaining that she was really tired of making films on HIV/Aids in order to survive. Yet, as she continued, her main concern was her observation that, increasingly, many Western-educated filmmakers in search of work opportunities push into this one area, which used to be exclusively reserved for filmmakers from the regions for which these films are made.

In my view, one area that is overdue for study is that of the different types of films produced in Africa, which would require an in-depth analysis of the differences regarding audience expectations and distribution realities, taking into account the very few ‘classical’ cinemas that still operate across the African continent. It is also a fact that audiences all over Africa crave films that relate to subjects, issues and realities familiar to them. The Nollywood success story has made this clear, not least by creating ways to reach out to, and cater for, the expectations of contemporary local audiences. This analysis would also need to address issues like stereotypes and pre-conceptions of African cinema in the Western world. For example, the film *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005)<sup>4</sup> by Mark Dornford-May<sup>5</sup>, which won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 2006, was argued by some critics not to be a ‘proper African’ film because it appropriated what was seen as genuine European culture – opera. One journalist explained why he so disliked the film: he could not understand ‘the necessity’ of adapting George Bizet’s *Carmen* given that African filmmakers have such an abundance of ‘authentic’ music to choose from. Such reactions can be very disturbing, even misleading, particularly in light of art produced in the West and its longstanding citing, copying and appropriating

of African artistic expressions of all kinds. In light of global accesses, these essentialist notions are caught up in a colonial perception of the 'other', which must remain the 'Other.' This notion is not only outdated, but causes manifold further misunderstandings and often harms potential for (future) collaborations.

I have often observed that African artists are afraid to (or are tired of doing so) speak out against such colonial discursive formations, either from frustration or out of fear of losing a chance with potential funders or commissioning editors for current or future projects. Worse still, some African filmmakers believe that they have to accept such realities; for example, working on scripts that cater to outdated assumptions or stereotypes. This easily causes a short-circuit effect: the more progressive jurors or lecturers in the Western film funds time and again reject such projects precisely because they dislike the outdated African reality described in the script, but at the same time these are the projects that are being developed or financed. Such matters, however, are rarely openly discussed by Westerners, especially those engaged with African art or artists because they are equally shy, or too reserved to speak up because of the fear of being labelled 'racist', or concerns of being considered as imposing on a debate which is not 'theirs'. So there is a discourse happening, but it is very complicated and multi-layered, and the conditions make it difficult to stimulate an open and honest debate in a post-colonial context. This more often than not prevents constructive/creative communication between active African and European partners. It also further complicates cultural exchange and collaboration between African filmmakers and Western decision-makers.

Yet so far many of the new and existing initiatives have failed to work towards greater transparency of intentions on both sides. I do not want to be misunderstood: by no means am I implying a conspiracy of 'bad' intentions from those active in this field. On the contrary, I think partners from the West would work more successfully with African filmmakers if they were more aware of their own historic legacies and contemporary privileges, and of how this positions them in the eyes of African artists and collaborators. For example, concerning festival politics, I know that many festivals worldwide would love to have more content from Africa, especially representations of an urban Africa with modern cinematographic aesthetics, which work well with



the rest of their programmes. The problem, however, is that, due to the multiple challenges most filmmakers in Africa face, such as a lack of access to international productions, festivals and cultural discourses, their aesthetics often do not speak to contemporary cinematographic trends elsewhere. Harun Farocki's<sup>6</sup> films are in vogue in Europe, but no one on the African continent wants to see them. On the other hand, there are films which are very popular on the African continent but do not fare at all well in the West. I recall screening Djo Wa Munga's<sup>7</sup> film *Viva Riva!* (2010) in Burundi, 40 kilometres away from the DRC, where he lives. In the DRC the film was a great success, but in Burundi the exclusive audience, filled with people from the local film community, were shocked and left the screening. This is also a reflection on the diversity of the audiences and their expectations and reception of content in different contexts.

In light of these experiences and observations I can only say that it would be of great advantage if those in decision-making positions in Europe and the West would synergise their efforts in closer co-operation with African partners. Even more important might be to understand the need to support the development of existing partner organisations of a non-private nature in African countries. Most of these organisations are deprived of any aid – financially and politically – but are requested to 'be there and function' in order to be the much sought-after partners for the next round of training to take place. When, in September 2010, some 30 of the leading women in the African film industries met in Johannesburg by invitation of the Goethe-Institut, South African filmmaker Jyoti Mistry had a wonderful idea: she suggested creating informal 'producer-hives' between African filmmakers across different countries. Her idea was a response to the fact that most of the participants pointed to their loneliness and isolation in the film world as their most difficult and burdensome struggle, apart from the chronic lack of funding, of course. The producer-hives, as they were discussed, could function as little units of three or four film professionals, who – independent of their locale – support each other by, for example, reading each other's scripts, checking budgets sent via email, sharing contacts with whom proposals could be submitted, and taking time for Skype sessions now and then, among other initiatives.

The idea clicked instantly, and less than six months later the first ‘offspring’ of these producer-hives were taking off. During FESPACO 2011, Egyptian producer/director Jihan El-Tahri<sup>8</sup> told me how excited she was about working with Sudanese Taghreed Elsanhoury<sup>9</sup> on a documentary in Khartoum. From Taghreed I heard more than once that Khartoum is a truly lonely city when it comes to filmmaking. It was during the conference in Johannesburg that the two had decided to work together as support for one another. The film *Our Beloved Sudan* (2011), written and produced by Taghreed and co-produced by Jihan, was released a year later.

As to how far these few inspiring and encouraging stories from Kenya and Sudan can be seen as indicators for a brighter future for women in the African film industry, it is hard to tell or predict. No doubt it would be an easy game to collect stories and biographies to prove things are getting worse and worse by the day, especially for women. To survive as a woman director or producer is hard anywhere in the world, but in Africa there are quite a few additional burdens placed on the individual’s shoulders. By this I mean, for instance, traditions or framings stemming from within the various cultural backgrounds; take the small number of active female filmmakers in Africa: this is evidence that the challenges faced are different from those found in the European context. Another challenge is the global financial crisis, which has given a good excuse to prioritise the issues surrounding filmmaking as part of cultural production even less, when they were second or third on the list anyway in comparison with health issues or education. Therefore, looking at women’s issues in male-dominated African filmmaking certainly falls under the category of challenges facing women filmmakers. But the women who met in Johannesburg during the conference have addressed this issue as only one burning topic amongst many others. It was both interesting and encouraging to watch the debate highlighting their opportunities, namely the access to female audiences in Africa, which are easier target groups than male audiences. Besides, who would have foreseen the events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which are re-shaping the ‘established’ world order on a big scale? No matter what is yet to happen, no matter what the political consequences are, a single reality is that from now on both Europe and North America are being forced to look much more

closely at events in this region (MENA), which has historically suffered from a lack of good media coverage – or complete media oblivion – but has now got to be recognised.

During the Berlinale in February 2011, Berlin-based distributor Irit Neidhardt from MEC-film curated a programme, ‘Traces of Change in Egypt’, to run parallel to the festival as an impromptu reaction to the revolution which had just begun. At this event it became very clear that, contrary to the general point of view, we in Europe had simply overlooked the signs of foreboding, namely films from filmmakers of the region which offered clues as to the state of things. ‘Before’ there was simply no interest: no audience and no screening slot in Europe for these films which, suddenly, everyone was rushing to come and see. To paraphrase Irit Neidhardt, since 2010 an independent film scene has emerged in Egypt. With the help of digital technology, more and more filmmakers are trying to express themselves outside of the highly commercial state-run film industry and against the ever-increasing repression of the regime. In this ad hoc program, made possible with the support of Berlinale’s Forum section, we showed some short films as well as trailers of full-length independent Egyptian films which introduced the range of political and aesthetic approaches to filmmaking in this context.

The current political situation seems a crucial moment to review the European and Western media and film collaborations, not only in the MENA region, but also in sub-Saharan Africa. Such a review is overdue, and yet not an easy task. For decades commissioning editors, festival programmers, sales agents and other decision-makers agreed that there were hardly any audiences in Europe for films from Africa. Thus the *circulus vitiosus* gained speed: with less and less funding available for African filmmakers, who were largely dependent on funds from Europe, fewer productions were made, resulting in many older professionals in Africa losing their skills due to a lack of practice, whereas only a few younger people were lucky enough to receive an education abroad and they joined the diaspora life in order to retain their opportunity for a filmmaking career.

Indeed, it is very hard to market African films commercially in Europe, even those of outstanding quality like, for example, *Un Homme qui Crie* by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun,<sup>10</sup> which was released

in 2011 in Germany. This was the first African film with a regular cinematographic release in months, and while the German critics raved in their reviews, this did not lead to full houses in Berlin. And this was far from unexpected, since in Germany films from or on Africa have long been associated with topics of hunger, deprivation and misery in all its facets, which goes against audience expectations of 'good entertainment'. More or less automatically, films from or on Africa seem to be deemed of interest only to those very few cinemagoers with a pre-existing political or cultural interest in Africa, which is certainly not enough in numbers (economically) to fill multiplexes in Hamburg or Cologne for more than a week. This comes as no surprise to people with a close eye on the market: after ignoring films from Africa for so long, it will take some time, clever strategies and 'different' films to build up audiences in Germany or any other Western country, and to 'prove' that African films have much more to offer than – and are able to challenge – outdated preconceptions of African experiences. Of course, festivals can and must play a crucial role by discovering new talents and sparking interest in fresh imagery of hitherto untold stories from countries like Kenya or Chad or South Africa. This is what people love and cherish during the festival days of Berlin, Cannes, Venice or Sundance. But once the festivals end, the very same people who willingly form long queues and wait for hours to see a film from Egypt or Senegal disappear into thin air and very few of them seem to attend such films outside of the festival context. Buyers, sales agents and cinema owners know about this and anticipate a flop even if everyone agrees that the film is a masterpiece.

Still, the most promising approach might be to keep looking for individual projects and initiatives that have the potential to bring change, whether it be with the success of a single film, one functioning network or particular training that has concrete results for participants. Building on those pilot projects would mean having intelligently to create both local and international alliances in order to further protect and nurture new and experienced talents. This might be regarded as the old-fashioned grassroots approach, but the female film practitioners who gathered at the Johannesburg conference at the Goethe-Institut were absolutely keen to explore just this route without losing time on detours.

It is just as important to accept that there is no master plan or blueprint for this process available, not in Africa, not in Europe and not anywhere else. This seemingly simple insight might bring a breeze of fresh air into this huge debate, since it is as frustrating to wait for such a revelation as it is to look for the scapegoats in charge.

In my opinion it is crucial to introduce a new approach to analysing the complexity of the situation: the interdependencies of problems, challenges and potential in media production and dissemination in the many different realities of today's Africa. Europe must accept its active role in this matter, and must deal with its own post- and sometimes neo-colonial realities and confront itself with its contemporary legacies. This very debate is currently at the top of the agenda in the academic world of post-colonial studies, which could also be of practical benefit for the film industries on both sides of the pond, as it could potentially open up spaces for mutual learning and exchange. It should be reiterated that Africa has a huge market for audio-visual products which is far from saturated and explored, and which could be of vital interest in the near future for film industries worldwide, explicitly including African players. It is also refreshing to see that Europe and the West do seem to be coming to understand that the lack of images and media from the African continent is too important an issue to further ignore, since it has not only cultural but also economic and political implications.

In the end, it *does* matter whether or not Europe takes an interest in these developments and reacts with an appropriate sense of its responsibilities. To come to terms with and define concrete actions and consequences would require urgently focused and enhanced communication between artists and politicians, decision-makers and economists stemming from both African and European backgrounds.

## NOTES

- 1 Founded in Nigeria in 2005.
- 2 The French New Wave (Godard and Truffaut), Italian Neo-Realism, Dogma '95 with Lars von Tier and Thomas Vinterberg or the initial stages of Third Cinema with Solanas and Getino are only a few examples for the creation of such productive 'scenes'.

- 3 FESPACO, Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou) is the largest existing African film festival, and was founded in 1969.
- 4 A South African remake of Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875), the operatic film is shot in isiXhosa, set in the Cape Town township of Khayelitsha, and combines music from the original opera with African musical traditions.
- 5 Mark Dornford-May is a British-born South African theatre and film director.
- 6 German filmmaker who made over 90 films, many of them short documentaries with an experimental character.
- 7 Film director and producer from the Democratic Republic of Congo who won the African Movie Award for *Viva Riva!* in 2011 and also an MTV Movie Award (2011). See Wa Munga in conversation with Rumbi Katedza in Chapter 5.
- 8 See the interview with Jihan El-Tahri in Chapter 4.
- 9 See the interview with Taghreed Elsanhoury in Chapter 3.
- 10 Well-known director, producer and writer from Chad.